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Bednall, AL (2012) Fashion Revolution China. Text+Work. ISBN 978-0-901196-49-1

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Publisher: Text+Work

Please cite the published version

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Fashion Revolution China: Exhibition of Chinese 20th Century Fashion

The Gallery @ The Arts University College Bournemouth, England UK

To Feb24th 2012 Admission Free



The inspiration, archiving and realisation of this exhibition runs parallel to, and is informed by, a ten year personal journey. This began, in 2002, when I was privileged to have the opportunity to live in Beijing and work for an International Design Institute.

It draws together my own individual perceptions of China as well as my acceptance, as a foreigner, through marriage, into a Chinese family. The history of that family is in itself unique, in that there is documentary and photographic evidence that contextualises dramatic historical events, as well as personal references to many of the exhibits on display.

The Yu family photograph taken in 1930 shows three generations and illustrates not only traditional dress defined within an aristocratic and eminent context but the embraced influences of Western style that became influential amongst wealthy Chinese families of the time.



Pictured on the back row, fourth from the left is Yu Jing Yuan (my wife's grandmother) and fifth from the left her sister Yu Jing Yan. Extraordinarily, garments from both these women have survived to the present day and formed the initial catalyst for the archive.



When first arriving in Beijing there was a clear paradox between the generalist external view of China as seen through the eyes of Western media, documentary photographers and filmmakers with the reality of 21st century urban Chinese living. With the expected militaristic and historical visual references not being particularly evident. It was clear that much of the personal history and memories of change had been disregarded in favour of an economic and contemporary drive for the 'new' that had little time for the 'previous'.

As a fashion designer and educator there are key principles and drivers that inform my own practice and my philosophical viewpoint on fashion and clothing. Ostensibly, how people dress explores individual identity, as a non-verbal language, in response to social, economic and political contexts. All of which were both reinforced and illustrated during my time in China and the subsequent curating of this exhibition.

The exhibition has three sections all containing garments, images and objects that explore the changes in Chinese clothing across the 20th Century.

After the demise of the Qing dynasty due to the 1911 Revolution, social reform led to a change in dress codes. This was characterised by a greater freedom of expression for Chinese people, resulting in the development of the now iconic 'Qipao' dress, which had its roots in traditional wear but became, like men's fashion of the time, influenced by Western styles of dress. Often ornate and beautifully crafted the 'Qipao' became, by the 1930's and 1940's, the most significant and fashionable style of female dress in China.



When the Communist Party came to power in 1949 these Western influences were rejected as clothing came to represent nationalism, ideology and functionality. In the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, the Cultural Revolution limited style further, regarding care over personal appearance as a sign of spiritual corruption, and resulting in an androgynous style that made no real distinctions between male and female styles.



As this period ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, a new economic and political policy of 'opening up' to the world manifested in an unprecedented experimentation of dress styles and a renewed interest in Western fashion styles. This new era of recent economic reform and modernisation mirrored the earlier part of the 20th Century where in respect to fashion, modernisation meant Westernisation.

As early as 1979 Pierre Cardin presented the first international designer fashion shows in Beijing and Shanghai, albeit to a limited and professional audience and was soon followed by other brands, notably Nike, who opened their first joint factory and the rights to sell products in China in 1981. In a relatively short space of time ordinary Chinese replaced the previous uniformity with international styles and embraced the homogenous styles found in any city, anywhere in the world.

Contemporary China is now the second largest economy in the world and has nurtured its own fashion industry. As well as manufacturing garments for internationally recognised brands, local designers are creating beautiful collections and extravagant fashion events, which reflect new found wealth and global engagement. As a judge at China Fashion Week in Beijing from 2003 to 2009 I witnessed at first hand the significant development of this industry, searching for not only its own identity against the further emergence of global brands but the commercial and business profiles that support success and recognition.



There is an almost cyclic journey through the exhibition with the pre revolutionary pieces using fine Chinese and imported fabrics that incorporate hand embroidery and skilful manufacturing techniques, through to the contemporary designers such as Guo Pei and Ran Fan who are reviving traditional skills and developing modern styles that are embedded with cultural resonance.



Significantly the period post 1949, through to the opening up of China in 1979, although stylistically tempered by a political overview, are crafted with care and precision and have an inherent beauty that should not be underestimated.

Ultimately the narrative to the exhibition is the unique and individual stories of the garments and their owners or designers, supported by a broader visual and referenced context, yet recognising that clothing and style cannot exist in a cultural vacuum and is impacted on, by a broad range of social, political and economic influences.

Anthony Bednall